

A MALAY NAUTCH.

BY

FRANK A. SWETTENHAM.

Read at a Meeting of the Society held on the 5th August 1878.

It was in the early part of 1875 that, being sent on a Mission to the Bandahara of Pahang, I witnessed, what I have never seen elsewhere in the Malay Peninsula or the Straits Settlements, a Malay Nautch.

I have of course, like most other people here I suppose, repeatedly witnessed Malays dancing and singing during the Muharam, especially in Penang; I have several times also been present at a Malay "Mayung," a kind of theatrical performance, with some dancing and much so-called singing:—the performers, as a rule, being a travelling company of three or four men and perhaps one woman, who make their living by their performances, and play either at the invitation of a Raja in his own house, or before the public on a stage erected in the middle of the Street.

Had the performance I now describe nearly resembled any of those commonly seen here, or in the Peninsula, there could be little interest in this description, but in the belief that the sight as I saw it is a rare one, seldom witnessed by Europeans, and so far undescribed, I have ventured to offer it, as it may, to some, be interesting.

The journey to Pahang and what occurred there I shall not speak of, for they have no bearing on the nautch. It will be sufficient to say that this was not my first visit to that state, that the Bandahara Ahmed and his chiefs were well known to me, and that whilst awaiting the Bandahara's decision in an important matter, for which I had already been delayed several days, we (for I had a companion) were invited to attend a Nautch at the Bandahara's Balei.

The invitation came at 2 a. m., and we at once responded to it.

Our temporary lodging had been the upper story of the Captain China's house, a not-too clean loft, gained by means of an almost perpendicular ladder, and furnished for the most part with the accessories of Chinese Processions, and a plentiful supply of musquitoes.

It was not therefore matter of regret to leave this, even at 2 a. m., for the Bandahara's Balei, a spacious Hall, the Entrance side of which was open and approached by steps, whilst the opposite side led through one small door into the 'penetralia' of the Bandahara's private dwelling.

The nautch had been going on since 10 p. m. There were assembled about 200 spectators, all or nearly all of them men,—squatting on the floor, on a higher or lower level according to their rank. We were accommodated with chairs and there was one also placed for the Bandahara.

When we entered, we saw seated on a large carpet in the middle of the Hall, four girls, two of them about 18 and two about 11 years old, all beautifully dressed in silk and cloth of gold.

On their heads they each wore a large and curious but very pretty ornament, made principally of gold—a sort of square flower garden where all the flowers were gold, but of delicate workmanship, trembling and glittering with every movement of the wearer.

Their hair, cut in a perfect oval round their foreheads, was very becomingly dressed behind, the head dress being tied on with silver and golden cords.

The bodies of their dresses were made of tight fitting silk, the neck, bosom and arms bare, whilst a white band round the neck came down in front in the form of a V joining the body of the dress in the centre, and there fastened by a golden flower.

Round their waists they had belts, fastened with very large and curiously worked "pinding" or buckles, so large that they reached quite across the waist. The dress was a skirt of cloth of gold, (not at all like the Sarong) reaching to the ankles, and the dancers wore also a scarf of the same material fastened in its centre to the waist buckle, and hanging down on each side to the hem of the skirts.

All four dancers were dressed alike, except that in the elder girls, the body of the dress, tight fitting and shewing the figure to the greatest advantage, was white, with a cloth of gold handkerchief tied round it under the arms and fastened in front, whilst in the case of the two younger, the body was of the same stuff as the rest of the dress. Their feet of course were bare.

We had ample time to minutely observe these particulars before the dance commenced, for when we came into the Hall the four girls were sitting down in the usual Eastern fashion, on the carpet, bending forward, their elbows resting on their thighs, and hiding the sides of their faces which were towards the audience with fans, made I think of crimson and gilt paper which sparkled in the light.

On their arms they wore numbers of gold bangles and their fingers were covered with diamond rings. In their ears also they had fastened the small but pretty diamond buttons so much affected by Malays, and indeed now, by Western ladies.

On our entrance the Band struck up, and our especial attention was called to the orchestra as the instruments were Javanese and seldom seen in the Malay Peninsula.

There were two chief performers, one playing on a sort of wooden piano—the wooden keys being the only resemblance, for with them the machinery of the instrument began and ended—knocking the notes with pieces of stick which he held in each hand—The other, with similar pieces of wood, played on inverted bowls of metal.

Both these performers seemed to have sufficiently hard work, but they played with the greatest spirit from 10 p. m. till 5 a. m.

The other members of the Band consisted of, a very small boy who played, with a very large and thick stick, on a gigantic gong—a very old women who beat a drum with two sticks, and several other boys who played on instruments like triangles.

All these performers, we were told with much solemnity, were artists of the first order, masters and a mistress in their craft, and I think they proved the justice of the praise.

I said the Band stuck up as we entered and I have tried to describe the principal figures in the scene which greeted us, and which impressed me, with much interest as a sight to which I was unaccustomed.

The Orchestra was on the left of the entrance, that is rather to the side and rather in the back ground, and I was glad of it. The position had evidently been chosen with due regard to the feelings of the audience.

From the elaborate and vehement execution of the players, and the want of regular time in the music, I judged, and rightly, that we had entered as the overture began. During its performance, the dancers sat leaning forward and hiding their faces as I have described, but when it concluded, and without any break, the music changed into the regular time for dancing, the four girls dropped their fans, raised their hands in the act of "Sambah" or homage, and then began the nautch by swaying their bodies and slowly waving their arms and hands in the most graceful movements, making much and effective use all the while of the scarf hanging from their belts.

Gradually raising themselves from a sitting to a kneeling posture, acting in perfect accord in every motion, then rising to their feet, they began a series of figures hardly to be exceeded in grace and difficulty, considering that the movements are essentially slow, the arms hands and body being the real performers whilst the feet are scarcely noticed and for half the time not visible.

They danced 5 or 6 dances, each lasting quite half an hour, with materially different figures and time in the music. All these dances I was told were symbolical, one, of agriculture, with the tilling of the soil, the sewing of the seed, the reaping and winnowing of the grain, might easily have been guessed from the dancers movements. But those of the audience whom I was near enough to question were, Malay like, unable to give me much information. Attendants stood or sat near the dancers and from time to time, as the girls tossed one thing on the floor, handed them another. Sometimes it was a fan or a glass they held, sometimes a flower or small vessel, but oftener their hands were empty, as it is in the movement of the fingers that the chief art of Malay nautches consists.

The last dance, symbolical of war, was perhaps the best, the music being much faster almost inspiring and the move-

ments of the dancers more free and even abandoned. For the latter half of the dance they each had a wand, to represent a sword, bound with three rings of burnished gold which giltered in the light like precious stones.

This nautch, which began soberly, like the others, grew to a Bacchante revel until the dancers were, or pretended to be, possessed by the Spirit of Dancing "hantu menari" as they called it, and leaving the Hall for a moment to smear their fingers and faces with a fragrant oil, they returned, and the two eldest, striking at each other with their wands seemed inclined to turn the symbolical into a real battle. They were however, after some trouble, caught by four or five women, who felt what the magic wands could be made to do, and carried forcibly out of the Hall. The two younger girls, who looked as if they too would like to be possessed but did not know how to do it, were easily caught and removed.

The Band, whose strains had been increasing in wildness and in time, ceased playing on the removal of the dancers, and the nautch was over. This was after 5 a. m.

The Bandahara who had appeared about 4 a. m. told me that one of the girls, when she became "properly" possessed, ate nothing for months but flowers, a pretty and poetic conceit.

In saying good bye we asked if we might, as I understood was customary, leave a present for the performers, who I should have mentioned were part of the Bandahara's own household.

He consented seemingly with pleasure, and we left him for our boat just as the day was beginning to break.

By the time we had got our traps together the sun had risen and was driving the night fog from the numbers of lovely islands which stud the river near the town.

We got into our boat, shoved off, and thoroughly tired lay down on the thwarts and in 10 minutes were fast asleep; only waking when we reached the "Pluto" at 7.15 a. m.